

Employees' Perception on Working from Home: A Case Study in Brunei

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Abstract: *Work from Home (hereon WFH) emerged as an effective intervention to protect workers from COVID-19 infection and ensure the continuity of businesses. However, the global workforce and business entities responded differently to this new paradigm shift due to disparities in implementing effective and employee-centric WFH strategies. Accordingly, this research uses the perceptual attitudes and experiences of employees to evaluate the existing organizational arrangements for WFH and their efficacy to facilitate employees in performing their jobs from home during the pandemic. We employed a qualitative approach and interviewed 15 employees of Organisation XYZ to investigate their perception of the organisation's WFH arrangements and recorded their experiences. The study found that employees' perceptual attitudes toward WFH during COVID-19 constitute four main components namely organisational support, personal factors, employee performance, and WFH transition. Further analyses elucidate that there are several components (themes) that positively and negatively impacted and shaped employees' experience of WFH. Our study suggests effective strategies to facilitate organizations gearing up for the transition to WFH during the pandemic by understanding the underlying factors that influence employees' perceptions and experiences of WFH.*

Keywords: Work from home (WFH); WFH during COVID-19; WFH perception; employees' WFH experience; effectiveness of WFH; working in pandemic

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 (a respiratory disease caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus) a global pandemic on 12 March 2020 and proposed numerous strategies to curtail the spread of the virus (WHO, 2020). The global jurisdictions imposed various countermeasures to contain COVID-19 which completely changed the daily lives of people (Tušl et al., 2021). We learnt that one of the most effective strategies to combat COVID-19 was the work-from-home (WFH) mandate which required employees to perform their professional duties from home (Loef et al., 2022; Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2020). The precipitous exposure to WFH startled employees and global entities as the continuation of businesses hinged on the adoption of a new working normal (Eurofound, 2020; Milasi, 2020). Ironically, both employees and their organizations were unprepared i.e., even in major advanced countries only 10% of workers had prior WFH

experience (Morikawa, 2022). This raised serious concerns about the effectiveness of WFH and the continuity of businesses due to declining productivity (Farooq and Sultana, 2022).

In Brunei, WFH has not become a work culture in the organisation, although there are still a few exceptions where some organisations have given the flexibility to WFH for their employees. According to Saraceni (2020), the concept of alternative work arrangements represents a growing trend within many organisations to shift once-common models of working to newer paradigms. Among many options, this includes models where employees may work from somewhere other than a primary physical office space (also called as ‘remote work’), or no longer possess a personal desk at their office (also known as ‘desk sharing’). Both remote work and desk sharing often require employees to adapt to a mode of ‘working’ far different than they are accustomed to, yielding a range of conflicting opinions, pros and cons, and unique experiences along the way.

Indeed, WFH transformed the existing work settings of employees having noticeable changes in their performance and the productivity of firms (Narayanamurthy and Tortorella, 2021). These changes mainly occurred due to the prevalence of differences in the perception and experience of WFH guided by the differences in cognitive and personal skills of employees and their access to essential tools and facilities mandatory during WFH (Galanti et al., 2021). Further, the onset of COVID-19 which is frequently linked to psychological and mental health issues among workers is likely to influence employees’ productivity and reduce their capability to fully understand organizational WFH arrangements (Tania et al., 2021).

Further, this research steps back from restricting performance to traditional indicators and argues that firms’ performance is a multidimensional concept composed of several theoretical and empirical components (Fernández-Temprano and Tejerina-Gaite, 2020). Contextually, it is implied that firms’ productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic may rely on specialized organizational resources allocated for creating WFH tools and facilities (Patanjali and Bhatta, 2022). The findings of recent studies have concluded WFH as a paradigm shift has disrupted employees’ boundaries, and improved productivity, and job satisfaction due to a reduction in stress (Vohra and Garg, 2022). One of the most attractive features of WFH is the reduction in traveling time allowing employees to spend more time with their families (Kawakubo and Arata, 2022). This has further reduced environmental pressure due to the limited use of carbon-emitting vehicles (Jain et al., 2022). The firms have also shown considerable interest in WFH as it boosts employees’ creativity and innovation (Tønnessen et al., 2021). Whereas some studies have criticized WFH and associated it with lower productivity due to shrinking work-life boundaries (Lee et al., 2022), prolonged use of digital devices, and absence of social interaction at work causing anxiety disorders (Sutarto et al., 2021), inefficiency in the completion of tasks due to unavailability of resources (Islam, 2022; Prodanova and Kocarev, 2021), and a frequent interruption from family members (Kerman et al., 2021). Firms often consider these factors while designing WFH policies however, the effectiveness of these policies is recognized by understanding the perceptions and experiences of employees as it may directly affect their productivity and decide firms’ future work orientations.

The rest of the paper discusses the literature review followed by the methodology used for data collection and analysis. The major findings of this study are outlined before concluding this research.

2. Literature Review

A careful survey of literature revealed that the understanding of WFH perceptions and experiences of employees is still in its infancy which motivated us to empirically investigate these behavioural aspects by engaging employees from an established organisation in Brunei.

2.1 Conceptualising WFH

Initially, WFH was conceptualised as telework or telecommuting and was introduced in the 1970s offering an innovative way to perform paid jobs from unconventional (homes) localities leveraging technological instruments (van Meel, 2011) where employees' physical presence in the office was not required (Nilles, 1997). WFH as alternative work arrangements has been used interchangeably as telework, telecommuting, flexible workplace, and remote working where workers are liberated from going to offices and are allowed to execute their jobs from home and interact with peers using information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Tavares, 2017). Seminal studies described WFH as the execution of minimal (20 hours a week) paid work from home (Crosbie and Moore, 2004). Over the years, policymakers and business entities have shown considerable interest in WFH due to its underlying features and impact on organisational productivity (Crosbie and Moore, 2004). However, the recent traction in WFH caused by COVID-19 started intriguing employees as it largely intervenes in their work-life balance and job performance (Campo et al., 2021).

A few studies have attempted to map the benefits of WFH and concluded that it allows employees to plan skills, overcome time constraints, execute work during highly productive hours, retrieve work-essential documents from home, select the suitable working environment, work during sickness, and accompany their family members (Nakrošiene et al., 2019). Some researchers have also linked WFH to positive changes in employees' performance, job satisfaction, and reduction in turnover intention and job stress (Vega et al., 2015; Contreras et al., 2020; Kossek et al. 2006; Fonner and Roloff, 2010; Coenen and Kok, 2014; Anderson et al., 2015). Unarguably, WFH is equivocal as it is complex and exhibits divergent effects on employees' work-life balance, overall health, and job satisfaction (Schieman and Glavin, 2017; Kim et al., 2020). While a large plethora of literature on WFH reported radical developments in job satisfaction (Cohen and Liani, 2009; Chung, 2018) and work-life balance (Fisher et al., 2009; Ellis and Webster, 1998; Fedáková and Ištonová, 2017), a few prevalent studies have also confirmed detrimental effects of WFH on normal life (Wessels et al., 2019; Novianti and Roz, 2020), mental health (Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Gálvez et al. 2020), and general quality of life (Azarbouyeh and Jalali Naini, 2014).

2.2 WFH – Paradigm Shift amidst the Pandemic

The future of work was fuzzy and remained in the limelight before the COVID-19 crisis. These uncertainties started to converge once the pandemic unfolded as both employees and their organisations immediately shifted to the new working domains known as WFH (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). Before the pandemic, WFH was recognized as an indicator of work-life balance, reduced work stress, productivity, and job satisfaction. However, WFH during COVID-19 may represent an entirely different work perspective due to the heterogeneous consequences of the pandemic (Tejero et al., 2021). The following discussion briefly overviews the impacts of WFH on employees during COVID-19.

The literature contains several empirical studies and survey reports discussing the jobs performed from homes during COVID-19 (Boeri et al., 2020; Bonnet et al., 2021; Brussevich et al., 2020; Ford and Ward, 2021; ILO, 2021). According to some regional studies, 34% of

jobs in America and 23% of jobs in some European countries are plausible to perform from home (Boeri et al., 2020). Similarly, a global survey conducted by International Labour Organization (ILO) (see Figure 1) reported that 5% of Americans, 2% of Eastern, Southern-Europe, and Central Asians, and 36% of East and South-Eastern Asian workers had WFH during the pandemic (ILO, 2021). From this, we note that the WFH trend was substantially higher for employees in East and South-eastern Asia compared to the workers in other regions.

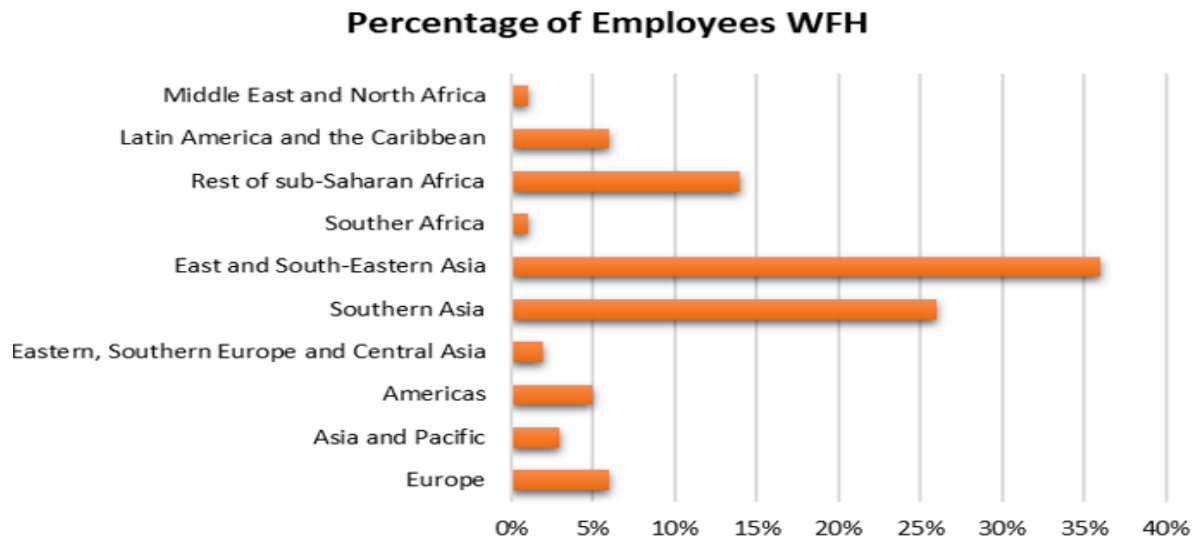


Figure 1: Percentage of Employees WFH According to Countries
 Source: (ILO, 2021)

2.3 Employees' Perception of WFH during COVID-19

The overview of the studies related to WFH during COVID-19 indicates that extant literature is monotonous as the researchers continue investigating the impact of WFH on employees and organisational productivity and job satisfaction. Further, there is no mutual consensus among scholars as some studies show that WFH is perceived as stressful, violates work-life boundaries, and negatively affects overall mental health (see, Afota et al., 2022; Kerman et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). While some studies observed that WFH is perceived as flexible, convenient, and matches people's current lifestyles (see, Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021; Sutarto et al., 2021). The findings of perceptions of employees and employers related to productivity and satisfaction also elucidate a disagreement among researchers implying that the debate on WFH during COVID-19 is still ongoing and needs further investigation. Following this research gap, we argue that employees' perceptions of WFH arrangements may allow organisations to identify and correct the defects in the facilities and tools provided to WFH which eventually may materialize into productivity and job satisfaction amidst COVID-19. To investigate employees' perceptual attitudes toward existing organisational strategies for WFH, we designed an analytical framework presented in Figure 2 below.

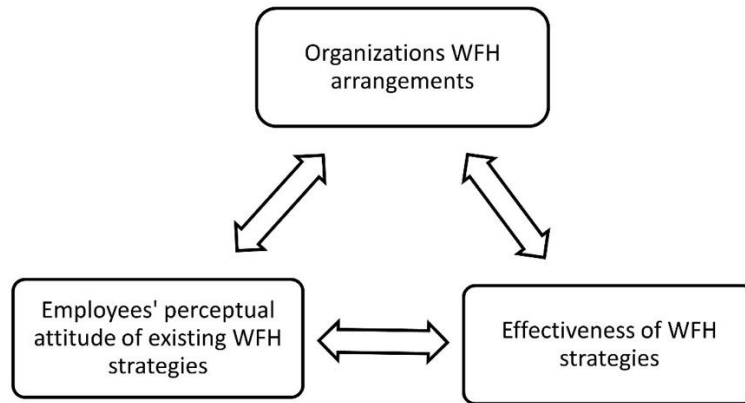


Figure 2: Analytical framework

The analytical framework presented in Figure 2 above disseminates that existing WFH arrangements of organisations and their employees’ perceptual attitudes are pivotal to the effective functioning of these strategies during COVID-19. Earlier studies on WFH recognized that organisational factors such as a dedicated support system, coverage of the costs spent on acquiring facilities for WFH, training employees to efficiently use technological and digital devices, and uninterrupted communication between employees and the organisation are the indicators of effective WFH strategies (Grant et al., 2019). A few recent studies have also emphasized the role of organisational factors in reshaping the state-of-the-art WFH strategies during the pandemic and acknowledged the significance of organisational policies (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021), workplace characteristics (Weale et al., 2022), communication systems (Afrianty et al., 2022), essential technological infrastructure (Sharma et al., 2022), and supportive supervisor (Campo et al., 2021) to maximize the productivity of employees WFH during COVID-19. Organisational trust is also closely related to employees’ productivity in WFH as the trust of managers and peers in employees’ skills stimulates job security (Baruch, 2000). In the context of COVID-19, the findings of a recent study on WFH suggested a positive relationship between managers’ trust and employees’ performance (Campo et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of COVID-19 strategies designed for WFH can also be examined by assessing the perceptual attitude of employees. The findings of past studies identified that employees’ personal and cognitive skills such as technology adaptation, personal motivation, work dedication, independence, work-directed approach, self-discipline, time management skills, and personal and family circumstance may constraint their ability to WFH (Baruch, 2000). The novel studies on WFH during COVID-19 have discussed interesting findings about employees’ perceptions. The perceptual assessment of WFH indicated knowledge and skill gaps in the use of technology that may undermine employees’ work potential (Sharma et al., 2022). Some scholars have also described enhanced family commitments as the barriers to WFH due to blur family ties (Lee et al., 2022). Further, the extensive use of digital devices during WFH, lack of emotional support from family, social isolation from peers, and lack of resources were perceived as the drivers of stress, mental health issues, inefficient completion of tasks, and work procrastination among employees (Islam, 2022; Prodanova and Kocarev, 2021; Sutarto et al., 2021; Tejero et al., 2021; Vohra and Garg, 2022; Xiao et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research methodology to understand the WFH arrangements of Organisation XYZ during COVID-19 and evaluate employees’ perceptual

attitudes and experiences while performing their jobs under these arrangements. This will help us to identify the essential factors to design effective WFH strategies. Following a qualitative research approach (Maxwell, 2012), the current study aims to achieve the following research objective which is to evaluate the perceptual attitude and experience of employees toward established WFH arrangements.

The use of a qualitative research approach is consistent with the aims of this research offering us a deeper and more inclusive insight into WFH strategies during the pandemic (Farber, 2006). The adoption of this methodological approach is expected to allow researchers to employ scientific techniques and procedures in data aggregation and develop interpretive themes and patterns (Creswell, 2009).

3.1 Data Collection

The primary data was drawn through structured interviews conducted between 6 January 2022 to 11 January 2022 with Organisation XYZ employees. The interviewees had diverse professional backgrounds and were pushed to WFH during COVID-19. The selection of participants based on their professional backgrounds ensured wide coverage of WFH perceptions and experiences of employees from different professions such as business analysts, marketers, retail staff, engineers, administration staff, and senior executives. This strategy established the inclusiveness of this research as recent studies are limited in terms of professional coverage (see, Kerman et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). Altogether, 15 employees participated in preplanned online interview sessions as per respondents' convenience due to unavailability during random hours. The selection of small sample size is relevant as it is expected to support the depth of case-oriented analysis (Dworkin, 2012). Further, preplanned online interviews are a popular data collection technique during COVID-19 as it is efficient and does affect the data quality (Moises, 2020). The interviewees were provided with a copy of the questionnaire containing instructions and the purpose of the interviews. This approach ensured that participants consult the organisational documents outlining WFH protocols during COVID-19 which allowed us to gain insight into the formal WFH arrangements.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedures

The recorded interviews were transcribed and processed in Microsoft Excel for data analysis to compile responses using the Manual technique. Following Basit's (2003) criteria, transcribed interviews were carefully examined to gain a general overview of available content followed by a content analysis technique to design themes and sub-themes from current WFH policies and employees' perceptual attitudes. There is no established theory to authenticate these procedures, however, following the conceptual uniqueness of WFH during COVID-19 helps to apply special conditions and endorse the use of themes and sub-themes without any bias (Kondracki et al., 2002).

3.3 Analysing and representing

The analysis of all the variables resulted in four main themes such as (I) organisational support, (II) personal factors, (III) employee performance, and (IV) transition to WFH. An interesting feature of our analytical framework indicates that the perceptual attitude of employees towards WFH during COVID-19 is determined by both positive and negative aspects. Figure 4 below outlines the analytical framework of this study. The polarity of factors is indicated by upward (positive factors) and downward (negative factors) arrows.

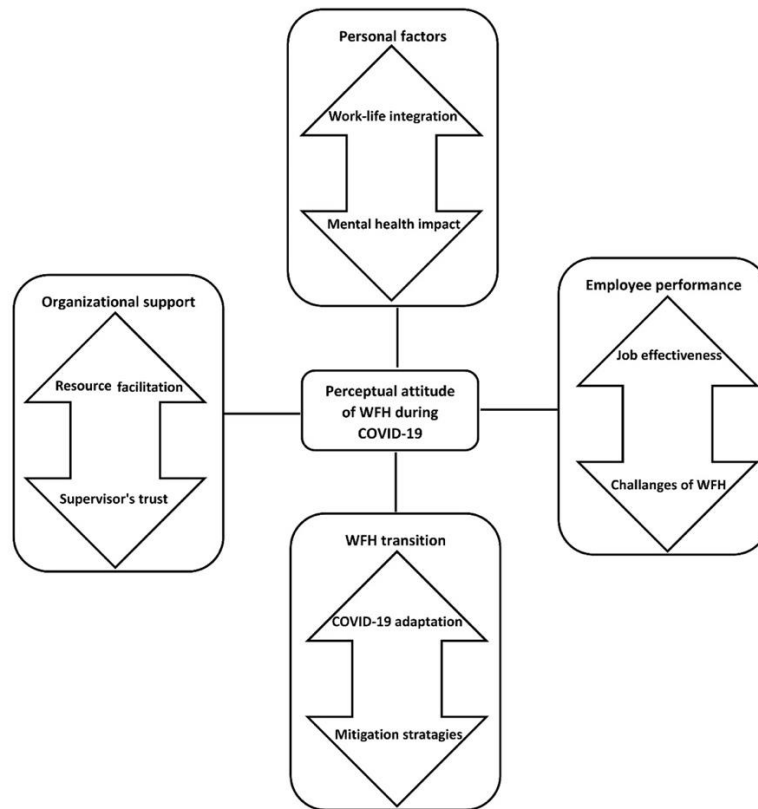


Figure 3: Framework of perceptual attitudes to WFH during COVID-19

4. Findings and Discussion

To understand employees’ perceptual attitudes toward WFH during this pandemic, we conducted in-depth interviews and developed an analytical framework (see Figure 4). The main components of this framework are converted into themes and their interrelation is discussed by contextualizing them to the perception of interviewees. The response of the interviewee to each component (theme) of our framework is indicated by ‘#’ in parenthesis (e.g., #1 decodes the opinion of respondent 1 to a specific theme). The explanation of themes through respondents’ quotes leads us to develop qualitative propositions highlighting the role of each theme in understanding the perceptual attitude of WFH during the pandemic. The use of propositions in qualitative studies is consistent with Creswell’s (2009) approach as it allows researchers to establish a preliminary and hypothetical nexus between research variables. Furthermore, the use of propositions in qualitative studies enhances their credibility to develop logically explained theoretical research models often operationalized in empirical studies. We imported the qualitative data within the main body of the text to discuss the findings of our study using Colquitt’s (2009) technique.

For the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate on the first theme only, namely Organisational Support.

4.1 Theme 1: Organisational Support

The results of this study represent that organisational support is the first component of the framework to analyze employees’ perceptual attitudes toward WFH during COVID-19. The findings of this factor indicate that respondents held both positive and negative opinions about the influence of organisational support in shaping the perceptions of WFH during COVID-19.

This allowed us to segregate organisational support factors into two themes which are discussed below;

4.1.1 Resource Facilitation

Most of the participants revealed that organisational resources such as standardised WFH regulations, availability of tools such as fast internet, phones, computers, and designated work and social networks are essential to WFH. Contextually, an interviewee highlighted that:

“WFH regulations of our company are flexible, easy to understand, and in compliance with the regulatory requirements of Ministry of Health (MOH). Our company was relatively quick to shift to WFH since the first wave of COVID-19 started in Brunei and has organised essential resources such as extra allowances for employees to subscribe to high-speed internet, work phones, laptops, and assistance to situate designated workstations at home (#4).”

Organisations often form functional teams for project completion, mutual collaboration, and propagate workplace issues. Employees perceive these groups as an ultimate refuge to seek work, social, and moral support. The dynamic changes in work settings caused by COVID-19 forced businesses to establish unconventional teams and groups using Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp, and Microsoft Teams to provide work and social support to employees. A respondent (#5) asserted that:

“Our company has established virtual work and social platforms using Microsoft Teams which is very efficient and easy to use. We (employees) usually interact with each other through this platform whenever I have a work-related query with my supervisor or even when I need social and moral support (#5).”

This finding leads us to infer that effective resource facilitation to create standardized and flexible WFH protocols and the provision of essential tools to WFH positively interact with the perception of employees. This result warrants the projections of recent studies (Patanjali and Bhatta, 2022; Sharma et al., 2022; Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021) claiming that the allocation of resources to create IT-based infrastructure may improve the effectiveness of WFH during the pandemic.

4.1.2 Supervisor’s Trust

A few respondents perceived that some of the organisational factors such as the supervisor’s trust are the barriers to effectively WFH. The participants revealed that goal ambiguity, lack of supervisor support, and communication complications are some of the main hurdles of WFH during this pandemic. One of the respondents (#11) summarized supervisor trust as follows:

“Generally, I am trusted by my supervisor however, in certain situations, minimal instructions are provided and I am expected to accomplish the assigned task without clear instructions. Also, on certain occasions, the supervisor did not immediately respond to my queries which forced me to postpone the task to the next day (#11).”

The managers and supervisors are perceived as the focal contact person to proffer workplace issues and challenges. Therefore uninterrupted and open communication between employees and supervisors is cardinal to WFH during this challenging COVID-19 phase. The perception of communication barriers and problems faced due to interruptions in communication was expressed by one of the interviewees (#10):

“Although, WFH has quite a number of benefits, however, frequent interruptions in communication with my supervisor leave me stranded sometime and I start doubting my capabilities and job performance especially the realization of meeting tight timelines and the unavailability of my supervisor/manager further adds to the stress (#10).”

This finding implies that the perceptions of the supervisor’s trust may serve as a barrier to the effective functioning of WFH policy. This finding is consistent with the studies of Weale et al. (2022), Afrianty et al. (2022), and Campo et al. (2021) corroborated that workplace characteristics such as managers’ trust, employees’ surveillance, and constant disruptions in communication may influence their productivity.

4.2 Theme 2: Personal Factors

The findings of the second component are related to employees’ perceptions about the role of personal factors in influencing their perceptions about WFH during COVID-19. The results identified that the themes of work-life integration and mental health impact themes represent the overall perceptual attitude toward personal factors. The findings outline that the work-life integration theme is a positive contributor whereas, mental health impact has a negative influence on the perceptions of personal factors.

4.2.1 Work-Life Integration

The perceptions of work-life integration positively contribute to the perceptions of WFH implying that factors such as a comfortable working environment in the form of virtual social and work platforms powered by IT technologies are effective for WFH. Additionally, employees perceived that home comfort allows them to take frequent coffee breaks and spend more time with their family members. Most of the respondents of this study shared positive views on how WFH during the pandemic has created a window of opportunities for them to better integrate their work-life. A respondent (#7) explained that:

“ Staying at home during this pandemic has helped me to switch to a healthy eating routine, exercise, and spend more time with my family members, especially my spouse and children. Before the pandemic, a healthy lifestyle and spending quality time with family members were difficult however, the emergence of COVID-19 forcing WFH has proved a blessing in disguise as it gave me extra two hours a day out of my hectic work schedule which is leveraged to spend with my family and perform physical activities (#7).”

A respondent expressed the perceived benefits of home comfort:

“WFH has reduced my stress and anxiety levels by saving me from commuting to work, pollution, weather, and traffic problems. The luxury of home comfort allows me to work in a comfortable working environment in a comfortable attire which has certainly enhanced my concentration levels and ability to efficiently perform work (#3).”

This finding leads us to infer that perception of work-life integration positively influences employees’ perceptions of WFH during COVID-19. This result is consistent with the findings of Vyas and Butakhieo (2021) and Sutarto et al. (2021) concluded that WFH perfectly matches people’s existing lifestyle as it is flexible, convenient, and allow people to maintain an exceptional work-life balance.

4.2.2 Mental Health Impact

The impacts of COVID-19 on mental health are debated and researchers have associated multiple factors with mental health issues caused by WFH. Following the perceptions of the

respondents of this research, it is determined that mental health impacts may negatively influence the perceptual attitude toward WFH during the pandemic. While expressing mental health issues faced by WFH, interviewees revealed numerous catalysts. One of the respondents exhibited:

“Mental and physical burnout is inevitable during WFH due to unclear boundaries between work and home inhibiting employees to differentiate between work and home especially when it is difficult to switch-off work mode (#1).”

Another respondent defied the benefits of WFH and opined:

“The emergence of COVID-19 and unanticipated shift to WFH has startled my mental health as I was following an organised work routine explicitly separating my work and personal boundaries (#14).”

Similarly, another respondent contextualized WFH as the source of mental health issues and articulated that:

“It is impossible to virtually participate in all work-related events as it is tiring and certainly not conducive to my mental health (#15).”

Further, respondents also designated loss of creativity by linking it to fear of disconnectivity:

“The low credibility of internet and performance of electronic equipment sometimes scares me of being disconnected from work, hampers efficient task completion and lowers my creativity (#6).”

These expressions imply that the mental health impacts of WFH may adversely affect the perceptions of WFH during COVID-19. This finding is compatible with the studies of Afota et al. (2022), Kerman et al. (2022) and Lee et al. (2022) argued that WFH is stressful as it ushers virtual fatigue, violates the work-life balance, and affects the mental health of employees.

5. Conclusion

This research aims to understand the perceptual attitude of employees toward WFH during COVID-19. The perceptual attitudes are measured by assessing employees' experiences of organisational arrangements of WFH amidst COVID-19. We employed a qualitative technique and conducted in-depth interviews with 15 employees of Organisation XYZ currently undergoing WFH. The results indicate that four main factors such as organisational support, personal factors, employee performance, and WFH transition constitute employees' perceptual attitude toward WFH. We concentrate on the first two factors namely organisational support and personal factors to find that resource facilitation and work-life integration positively influence the perceptual attitudes of these components. Whereas, the supervisor's support and mental health impact negatively the components of employees' perceptual attitude. This shows that regardless of where an employee works, the organisational support that can include the spiritual aspect is important in balancing the demands of work and life, especially during COVID-19 lockdown and WFH.

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